

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 131 465

CS 203 035

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TITLE Poetic Listening.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the 1976 Modern Literature Conference
EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Literary Analysis; *Literary Criticism; *Poetry; Rhetorical Criticism; Theories

ABSTRACT

The poet always listens to himself or herself as part of the expressive act that is the poem, and that listening becomes an essential part of the completed poem. The listening is never fused into the expressiveness of the poem's making, however, but continues in a dramatic relationship with that expressiveness. The difficulty of poetry stems from this dialectical and dramatic aspect of its nature. The need to attend to this poetic listening is illustrated in discussions of various selections, as is the need to learn to listen dramatically to oneself as one is reacting to a poem. (AA)

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POETIC LISTENING

The reason a poem tends to be opaque and even seems to turn its back on a reader, especially in his first readings, is not that the poem is autonomous and experientially vivid, though those appear to be qualities characteristic of genuine poetry, but rather that the poem comes to a reader as twice-told. If autonomy--or the lack of any cultural context continuous in quality and texture with the poem--and experiential richness and intensity were the primary qualities of a poem, then one might submit to the charge that there is something contemptibly superior about it, something aristocratic which is at best only an embarrassment to both its maker and its proponents in an age of plainness. Who would strive to write poetry or to make it available to as many men as possible, if it simply soured their daily bread by its aloofness and exotic wildness? If experiencing poetry invariably turned men to drink, making them nostalgic for a past splendor, it would not be surprising if poets abandoned it for journalistic verse and critics mutilated it by treating it as rhetoric or semiosis. Who could care for poetry if its main effect were to turn a man against his mother and brother, severing his filial and fraternal bonds?

But poetry is difficult of access not because of its special qualities of autonomy and experiential vitality, but because it is listened to as it is spoken, heard critically as it is expressed, read as it is being written: it comes to its reader as twice-told. The poet always listens to himself as part of the expressive act that is his poem, and that listening becomes an essential part of the completed poem. It is never fused into the expressiveness of the act of the poem's making, but continues to be in dramatic relationship with that expressiveness. The fashionable phrase, "self-reflexivity," points in the direction

of this aspect of poetry, but because it is so verbalistic and precious, making one think of dandy and connoisseur, it is inadequate. For the basis of the twice-told quality of a poem is extremely common; it is the interminable talk or expressiveness (for words are not needed) that goes on inside most men most of the time. This talk does not usually show outwardly (unless one watches lips closely), except among men who feel so neglected and anonymous that they cease to distinguish between speaking inwardly and speaking outwardly. One must concede too that such talk can be silenced in a saintly way, by religious discipline or transcendental meditation, and in animalistic ways, in the enthralled experiences of mass entertainment, mass oratory, alcohol and drugs. The range of human living, however, is between that talk as a flow of babble that goes unattended to and that talk when it becomes what Giovanni Gentile calls a transcendental society of speaking and listening, of expressing and criticizing, of writing and reading. Most people, I expect, learn to recognize and respect the way a close friend listens to himself and even to note how the positions in the drama of inner dialogue can be reversed, even so as to show in outer conversation, one of the inner persons speaking at one point while the other listens and winces, as a result of which that other takes over the speaking while the first listens chagrined. To get both the speaking and the listening, the expressing and the criticizing, the writing and the reading, going on as part of the same dramatic act, this is what it means to be fully human, with thought and action, theory and practice, integral even if discordantly. To speak and to act under the questioning and judging and forgiving attentiveness of one's own Other or Conscience or Better Self is what used to be meant by the saying that man is made in the image of his omnipotent and omniscient Maker.

Traditionally, such ethical listening has tended to become heavily

normative and coercive. Poetic listening, in contrast, is what gives a poem its air of uniqueness and strangeness and is what keeps the poem alive and in motion no matter how many times one reads it. It is what, in Wallace Stevens' phrase, makes a poem "a finikin thing of air," always in relation to the expressiveness of the act of its making. A poet will attend to an upsurge of feeling, a deep impulsion that seems the very vis naturae, the moving force of his self and world; he will also attend to the swarm of words that impinge upon him as potential means for articulating his innermost feeling. Although it includes those forms of attentiveness, poetic listening is something different. It is in dramatic interplay with the poet's articulating of his deep impulsion in the expressive line of the poem as it unfolds. This listening, this responsiveness, this questioning, though inaudible directly, is felt like a touch that enlivens and subtilizes, as it calls in question, the more heavily masculine expressiveness which forges impulsion into image and thrust into rhythm. The meeting and touching of expressiveness and listening is the innermost drama of that act of making which is a poem. It is the hovering moment of

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

The shortness of the last line, "Or just after," leaves one with the silence, the attentiveness, of the moment "just after," while it is still in touch with the whistling. It is not that Stevens is exquisite so much as that he has a keen sense of that invisible half of the essential drama of poetry, that prehensive listening as it touches, "with inarticulate pang," the articulated line of the poem. Observe this drama going on in the last seven lines of "The Motive for Metaphor:"

The motive for metaphor, shrinking from
The weight of primary noon,
The ABC of being,

The ruddy temper, the hammer
 Of red and blue, the hard sound--
 Steel against intimation--the sharp flash,
 The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X.

The thrust of these lines is all towards forging that motive, that motor force, that leads to the shrinking movement which is metaphor. Without the motive, as the thirteen lines leading up to the last seven make clear, Stevens feels that metaphor is sickly, effete, evasive. Yet the opposite, the motive without the metaphorical shrinking, proves equally intolerable, as a result of which, as Stevens expresses that final line, "The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X," it is evident that he is listening to himself shrinkingly; without actually saying it he is allowing us to listen to quintessential poetic listening in metaphorical touch with the expressiveness of that last forged line.

The reader actually hears only the second, antithetical moment of a poem. That moment alone can properly be called structural; it provides the particularity of the poem and is what can be caught up in genre studies, what can be related to certain poems rather than others. It alone can be thought of serially, as the plot-line of the unfolding poem, as a metonymic or metaphorical series, as running imagery, as recurrent stylistic traits, or as a sequence of language situations. When a poem is analyzed stylistically or rhetorically or semiotically, it is the antithetical moment which is being analyzed as abstracted from the poem's other two moments: that which gives it its universality, the moment of feeling, the innermost impulsion of the poet's life and world, his sense of Being, which itself is so difficult of access because it is always a falling away from itself, a breaking into objective texture, a shouldering, heaving thrust into language; and that which gives it its individuality, its uniqueness, poetic listening in dramatic interplay with poetic expressiveness. The first moment of a poem, its deep impulsion, is shared by all poems as qualitatively distinct from

all other language, rhetorical or semiological; it is that upwelling that we call the experiential intensity and richness of poetry; it indeed is what we refer to by the word poetry. The poem's third or mediating moment, its expressive-listening moment, is what stamps the poem as autonomous, as original and as originative, as beginning with itself and transforming the universal impulsion into a distinctive rhythm and the particular texture of the poem into a vision incomparable with all that is other than itself.

Because neither the first nor the third moment can be heard and seen in a measureably physical way, they can be experienced only indirectly, as a result of one's looking at and hearing the second, antithetical moment of the poem. They are available only to historiographical, critical, and aesthetic scrutiny. Pseudo-scientific analysis touches nothing but the poem's antithetical moment; it is pseudo-scientific because it gives knowledge only of what is not, only of the non-being of the poem. But the scientific need for objectification, the fear of all that cannot be interpreted and decoded, the insistence that one must know possessively even if what he knows is nothing, makes many content to limit themselves to the serial aspect of the poem, and, more destructively, to reduce that which is not serial, the moment of feeling, or Being, to what is usually called intentionality, and the moment of poetic expressiveness and listening, the moment of Becoming, to reader response or reception. The poem is reduced by this means from an act to a process. This is like the reduction of a man who can think as he acts, who can hear and question and judge what he says as he says it, whose every action is self-criteriological, into a psyche, a psycho-somatic organism which has no autonomy, no freedom, no originality, unless it be to deviate within the natural and conventional frameworks that enclose it.

II

The difficulty of listening to a poem stems, then, from its dialectical and dramatic nature. One needs to be responsive to its deep impulsion and its objective, serial texture as under the shaping stress of the poem's mediating act. Moreover, that mediating act is itself dramatic, is simultaneously an interplay of expressiveness and listening so that, in addition to one's hearing what is expressed directly, one must listen inferentially not only to the mode of expression but also to the way that expressiveness is listened to by the poet. The difficulty of learning to listen in this inferential way is intensified by the merely instrumental nature of most mass entertainment and rhetoric, in which the work is a means, a device, a self-consuming artifact, used by a craftsman to have a certain effect on a projected audience. The work is made so as to exclude authorial expressiveness and attentiveness; and though the reader may be required to question himself, he is not to do any questioning of either the means or the group using it upon him. Indeed, if he does, he will lose the entertainment or rhetorical value of the experience. He will not buy; that is, he will not use the device properly, in such a way that he in turn becomes of use to its maker and his masters.

One has to be more than a psyche to read a poem. If, however, most of his life is spent being used as a psyche by others, his acquaintances and the mass media, then he is apt to adopt the position of a psyche in relation to a poem. He listens to it as though it were a device intended to affect a projected audience. He will, that is, identify himself with any imagined reader a work may have, with the group of men Marlow is supposed to be talking to, with some mock reader of the type Booth describes, or with an implied reader of the type analyzed in "reception aesthetics." If no such reader provides the psyche sliding uncontrollably

about with a comfortable spot from which to view and be affected, then he will necessarily become identical with the poetic listening of the work and will experience the felt image as expressed from that position within the work. As a result, when he thinks and speaks critically of the work, it will not in truth be him speaking of the work nor will it be the work of which he speaks. He will have reduced himself to a part of the work, to its listening part, and he will think and speak not about the work, but about the work as reduced to its expressiveness. His criticism, in consequence, will at best be a faded, unintended, uncontrolled imitation of the drama of expressiveness and listening that is the mediating act of the poem. How many times has one had to help a student recognize that his adverse criticism of Emma as a character is really not his but Jane Austen's, so that it was not him saying something about the novel, but rather a faded echo of one part of the novel commenting on the faded echo of another part? Or who has not, through successive readings of a novel like The Idiot, been surprised to discover that in an early, perhaps youthful reading, he himself had been no more than one part of the novel responding to another part? Not that one would judge such readings as bad or wrong. They are simply partial and need to be taken up, in later readings, into a drama that is more vital and acute than the partial experience could be in itself.

Because Harold Bloom's "antithetical criticism" is usually stimulating enough to be useful, I wish to illustrate by way of it this tendency to reduce poems from acts to processes. Bloom treats a poem as a text and for him texts are to be discussed "as though they were psyches." (Poetry and Repression, p. 245). By calling his criticism "antithetical," Bloom does not mean to signify a criticism which limits itself to what I have been calling the antithetical moment of a poem, though his focus is on that, the second moment of poems, and off their first and third

moments. He means instead that he reads against the poem and its poet; he reads as though the poem even if original is articulating an anxiety of influence, whereas the poet and his poem are marked by the claim of influence-free originality. In truth, he says, it is the same old dance (Ibid., p. 270). He is content with his particular form of adversary criticism because it is in truth antithetical in my sense of that word. Listen, for example, to what he does in his most recent book, Poetry and Repression, with Stevens' "The Snow Man," which, he says, "can be considered Stevens' most crucial poem." (Ibid., p. 269)

THE SNOW MAN

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Bloom claims that in this poem Stevens works to the point

where the 'nothing' that is there and the 'nothing himself' of the beholder both are affectually equated with the greatest of American epiphanies: "I am nothing; I see all." That beholder, no Snow Man, yet "crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky," could end his reverie by affirming: "I am part or parcel of God." Stevens will go quite as far at the climax of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction": "I have not but I am and as I am, I am." "The Snow Man," back in 1921, abandons us to its title: to live with the trope of pathos, without the fallacy of attributing life to the object world, is to live only as and how a body of winter would live.

Ibid., p. 271.

One may wonder why Bloom says Emerson was no Snow Man, since the sentence immediately following upon "I am part or parcel of God" is

"The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances,--master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance." In any case, it is clear just from the short passage quoted from Bloom that as part of his equating the epiphany at the end of "The Snow Man" with the one Emerson records in "Nature," Bloom is equating Stevens himself with the snow man as beholder and he is equating the poem, "The Snow Man," with reverie, with a reverie like that of Emerson's. Bloom, it seems, is reversing Hobbes' distinction between the poet as one seeking after similitudes and the critic (and historian and philosopher) as one seeking out distinctions. From a Hobbesian perspective, that is, Bloom is writing poetry about criticism, he is making fanciful collapses of what is judgmentally discriminating.

The crucial collapse, however, is of the poem as act into the poem as process, of the poem as a dramatic and dialectical act into the poem as mere reverie, as mindless psychic flow. Bloom does, it is true, say that "The Snow Man, back in 1921, abandons us to its title: to live with the trope of pathos, without the fallacy of attributing life to the object world, is to live only as and how a body of winter would live." But does he mean to say that the poem contains those judgments, that is, the judgments that it is an error to attribute life to the object world and that not to commit that error "is to live only as and how a body of winter would live"? No, the poem, it is clear, is pure psychic process; Bloom's only evidence for the judgments, at least according to what he says, is the title, "The Snow Man." The title is taken to be a comment, a criticism, a judgment on the poem. The psyche, it is true, cannot flow and judge at the same time. It flows as a poem and only before or after does it coagulate as a judgmental title.

Why does Bloom read the title in this way? What has he against

snow men? They are white and pure and composed of the same material as their-surrounding world. The snow man sees purity because he is pure; he sees nothing because he is nothing. If he does not attribute "life," whatever that may mean, to the object world, it is only because he has none of that stuff in him. To live his way may be to live "as and how a body of winter would live," but not only so, because it is much like the life of a foetus in the womb, the organism and its environment always being the same temperature. Bloom has localized the critical aspect of "The Snow Man" in its title, not because that is where it is, but because he has on principle read the poem as a process and not as an act, thereby robbing it of its poetic "evening ear," a phrase William Collins used in reference to Milton's poetic listening. Unavoidably, having cut off the poem's ears, Bloom with Stevens, like Fish with Milton, must substitute his own. When it seems that Bloom is listening to a poem by Stevens, in reality it is Stevens listening to his own poem. That is the reason Bloom senses that Stevens is truly critical of the snow man beholder as Emerson is not critical of himself as beholder.

Poetic listening cannot, however, be attended to appreciatively by the reader-critic who becomes it, whether unintentionally as Bloom does, or as Croce deliberately does on the principle that poetic taste is identical with poetic genius. One is deafened by the inaudible whirr one has become and it shrivels up into something skeletal, something abstractly interpretive. Poets do not listen to themselves in their poems in an interpretive or hermeneutical way, although interpretation may be going on in a subsidiary manner within their distinctively poetic listening. I would not go so far as Diane Wakoski goes in the following lines, suggesting that poetic listening is actually creative of poetry:

Because I open myself up to poetry
Because everyone talks it
when they see how very well
I listen.

But I agree that that "final finding in the ear" is more like a creative source than an interpretive reduction. W.S. Merwin's way of putting it strikes me as close to perfect:

A poetic form: the setting down of a way of hearing how poetry happens in words. The words themselves do not make it. At the same time it is testimony of a way of hearing how life happens in time. But time does not make it.

Naked Poetry, p. 271

The critic who substitutes his listening for the poetic listening of a poem blanks out its very life and inaugurates that long desiccating process of interpretation, that centrifugal spiral of allegorization away from the poem into vacuousness. Poetic listening, in contrast, is centripetal; it is a constant, living swathing of the expressiveness of the poem and is the source of the air that allows the poem to breathe. Poetic listening is the inner form of a poem. It is the inaudible half of poetic rhythm the neglect of which has doomed every critical effort to think accurately about poetic rhythm. Limiting oneself to the expressiveness of poetic rhythm, as even Harvey Gross, who is close to the best on the subject, does, one invariably drifts away from the rhythmic form of poems to the abstract subject of a poet's characteristic rhythms.

The way Stevens listens rhythmically to the first six lines of "The Snow Man" in relation to the listening of the last six lines, with the middle three as transitional, is the inner form of the poem. The speaker-who-listens-to-himself of the first six lines is not the snow man, although he speaks of him; he is not the listener who is nothing and beholds nothing; he does not have a mind of winter and he has not been cold a long time. The first six lines are full of misery; the poet cannot listen to them except by thinking of it constantly. The rhythm of the first line has a trochaic tetrameter base, but Stevens jams it

up irreparably with the second word, "must," which demands an accent at least as emphatic as that on "one" and "have." The poem stalls. It can hardly begin. The misery in the thought of having "a mind of winter" and in having "been cold a long time" is what makes the listening of these lines a long shudder, only punctuated by the shivering pangs of "the pine-trees crusted," "the junipers shagged," and "the spruces rough," all having an abrasive or even cutting tonal tang on the tongue. The fourth line, "And have been cold a long time," though it has only seven syllables, is the longest of the poem because all the syllables are accented waveringly except the fifth, "a." This happens because the unaccented syllables of the line, the unheard "one must" which echoes half heard from the first line, open up an entirely unmetrical pause between the first and second syllables, so that the poet tends to thump stumbingly on both "have" and "been," only righting his balance and holding himself poised on the word "cold" for a second long pause. The rhythmical sensitiveness of effects like this establishes a way of listening that is sustained through the rest of the poem, contrapuntally, against the painless listening of the snow man, the unimpeding listening of that "mind of winter" which allows everything to move at a fast pace, anapaestically, with so many similar phrases (like "of - -," "In - -," "of - -," "In - -," "of - - -") that the sounds sieve through his mind like nothing blowing through nothing. The power of the last nine lines, what works against the rapidity of the rhythm as heard by the snow man, is the listening established in the first six lines. Stevens listens with intense pain to that emptiness listening to emptiness and is terrified at what it means to deal with death by way of actuarial tables.

Perhaps the line which is most clearly listened to in two ways is the ninth line, "In the sound of a few leaves." The "sound of the wind" has just been heard without a thought of misery, not a difficult thing to have happen since "the sound of the wind" is itself abstract, un-

realized, in need of something to move against, if it is to be heard by a human ear. "In the sound of a few leaves" has two basic effects: it repeats the phrasal structure of "in the sound of the wind" and thus initiates the increasingly rapid rhythm resulting from the very pointed syntactical repetitiousness (which itself is enhanced by the many repeated words) of the last nine lines. Its other effect, however, counters the first. It makes the listener hear the wind, truly hear it, as it moves and rustles the few dry leaves. That excruciating effect of dry leaves moved by the wind in winter, that cry that "concerns no one at all," one needn't know Stevens' "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters" or his "The Course of a Particular" in order to recognize how desolate it is as heard not by the snow man, but by the Stevens who has established the misery of his way of listening in the first two stanzas. Here, moreover, the effect is enhanced dramatically by the sense that the misery of his listening to the sound of the few leaves is exacerbated by his sense of the lack of feeling in the way the mind of winter hears that sound.

One could go on to interpret the poem as expressing how appalled Stevens is by minds that organize themselves for maximum speed and efficiency and comfort, minds which devise methods of criticism which exclude the possibility that the poem as alive, as resilient, as resistant, could turn its back on those who lop off its poetic ears so that they can take it in the way a cow takes in grass, with an end product, criticism resulting from the reduction of poems to processes, which is not milk, but dung. Even interpretation which rises out of a sensitiveness to poetic listening tends, however, to turn the poem into something of use. As a value such usefulness is incomparably less than that of the poem as a transcendental society, as an act of rhythmic expressiveness and listening.

III

It might be objected that my emphasis on poetic listening works fine only on poems which are clearly acts, like Paradise Lost and like most of Stevens' poems, but is clearly inapplicable to even the best recent poetry, notably the poems of Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery, which are composed not as acts, but as processes. As Bloom of all people shows, the objection might proceed, Ashbery's poems are psychic flights from and distortions of Stevens' poetry and are based on the unquestioning acceptance of whatever is as right just because, frankly, it feels comfortable to think so. And O'Hara's poetry is obviously engaged in nothing but the rendering in words of the processes of his sensibility from moment to moment. Any poetic listening which would involve the poet in his poems as acts of shaping is carefully excluded from them; their freshness and specialness rests on their not having been heard.

I would grant that O'Hara's poems seem not to have been intended. But the idea of poetic listening is not so limited as that of poetic intentionality. Paul Hernadi, in the winter issue, 1976, of New Literary History, argues that E.D. Hirsch's treatment of the meaning of any text as what the author "wills to convey" cannot be extended to cover the world to which historical documents refer. For "that would presuppose that all events, just like all texts, convey intelligible authorial meaning meant by one or...more than one consciousness," whereas even the life of one orderly man "is not a 'willed meaning' in the phenomenological sense upon which Hirsch's theory of interpretation and his distinction between meaning and significance are based." "Every human life," Hernadi proclaims, "entails a constant seesaw of fulfilled and frustrated projects and impulses as well as many events which are neutral..." Whatever one may think of "every human life," certainly O'Hara's poems cannot be treated as texts in Hirsch's sense. No one would contend that they

"convey intelligible authorial meaning meant by one or...more than one consciousness." They come to one as too full of the accidental, the fortuitous, and the contingent to permit one to experience them and think about them in that way.

Indeed, O'Hara's poems are like the endless talk that goes on in most men most of the time. But O'Hara did not write that many poems, he did not record that interminable talk interminably. His finest poems, in fact, evince the strong sense that he listened very acutely to his inner talk and chose out of it as poems segments which he valued as poetry. His poems are unintended talk, but that talk is not babble because it is listened to critically. Consider the poem entitled "A Step Away From Them," listening to it with these words from one of Marinetti's manifestos in mind:

Futurist poets! I have taught you to hate libraries and museums for the purpose of preparing you to Hate Intelligence, re-awakening in you divine intuition, that characteristic talent of the Latin races. By means of that intuition, we will overcome the apparently irreducible hostility which separates our human flesh from the metal of motors.

After the animal reign, now the mechanical reign begins. With intimate knowledge of material, of which scientists can know only the physico-chemical reactions, we are preparing for the Creation of a Mechanical Man with Replaceable Parts. We will free him from the idea of death, and so from death itself, the supreme definition of the logical intelligence.

Marinetti is as crazy as he sounds, and O'Hara is a Futurist poet, but with one addition which makes all the difference, his keen poetic ear. In "A Step Away From Them," O'Hara hears himself making futuristic leaps in sensibility, inconsequential, zany, associational jumps so that, when he does come across the desolate fact that those he values most, Bunny, John Latouche, and Jackson Pollock, are dead, his futuristic momentum will be sufficient to keep him going instead of breaking down and wallowing in despair and grief. For Marinetti, O'Hara's lines

Neon in daylight is a
great pleasure, as Edwin Denby would
write, as are light bulbs in daylight.

would be part of the plan to free man from death, from the darkness, from shadows. O'Hara, in contrast, recognizes it, along with his associational illogic, for what it is, as psychic evasiveness. O'Hara as a man and poet was not evasive, although he was, on the evidence of his poems, extremely sentimental. Or, more accurately, he valued certain persons more than most people think any person should be valued. To be as serious about individuals as O'Hara is is not psychically safe, and in consequence O'Hara cultivates his frivolous, futuristic illogic.

A Step Away From Them

It's my lunch hour, so I go for a walk among the hur-colored cabs. First, down the sidewalk where laborers feed their dirty glistening torsos sandwiches and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets on. They protect them from falling bricks, I guess. Then onto the avenue where skirts are flipping above heels and blow up over grates. The sun is hot, but the cabs stir up the air. I look at bargains in wristwatches. There are cats playing in sawdust.

On to Times Square, where the sign blows smoke over my head, and higher the waterfall pours lightly. A Negro stands in a doorway with a toothpick, languorously agitating. A blonde chorus girl clicks: he smiles and rubs his chin. Everything suddenly honks: it is 12:40 of a Thursday.

Neon in daylight is a great pleasure, as Edwin Denby would write, as are light bulbs in daylight. I stop for a cheeseburger at JULIET'S CORNER. Giulietta Masina, wife of Federico Fellini, a bell' attrice. And chocolate malted. A lady in foxes on such a day puts her poodle in a cab.

There are several Puerto Ricans on the avenue today, which makes it beautiful and warm. First Bunny died, then John Latouche, then Jackson Pollock. But is the earth as full as life was full, of them? And one has eaten and one walks,

past the magazines with nudes
and the posters for BULLFIGHT and
the Manhattan Storage Warehouse,
which they'll soon tear down. I
used to think they had the Armory
Show there.

A glass of papaya juice
and back to work. My heart is in my
pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy.

There is one rhythmical break in the poem, and it comes right after the name of Jackson Pollock. "But is the/ earth as full as life was full, of them?" That sentence cannot be read except slowly, stallingly, as though the motor of the poem is dying, as though the sentence that went before, concerning Bunny, Latouche, and Pollock, is one part of the poem that is not replaceable. As a result, what follows sounds very sad, as if echoing Prufrock: "And one has eaten and one walks,/ past the magazines with nudes/ and the posters for BULLFIGHT and/ the Manhattan Storage Warehouse,/ which they'll soon tear down. I/ used to think they had the Armory/ Show there." Notice how O'Hara regains his momentum. The agility of his psyche does not free him from death any more than neon lights in daylight free him from the idea of darkness, but it does prevent a breakdown. O'Hara understands, that is, that his psyche lives off the surface of life, associationally, just because, in his deepest center of feeling, he is always only "A Step Away From Them," a step away from the dead he loves, that step being only one step, even though he moves along at such a pace. O'Hara's poems, in sum, work very close to psychic processes, to the flow of inner babble, but his listening to that flow is sharp and cuts against the current. ~~His best poems are poetic acts, even though~~ not intentional. He opens himself up to those unforeseeable, unplanned, unintended forces of his inner and surrounding life as no deliberate, crafty, intentional writer could do. His courage, the strength and value of his poetry, is that he listens to what is going on, to the anguish and the defensiveness, without defenses, as a man as stripped at heart

as Blake was. Obviously, O'Hara, in contrast to Blake, is frivolous. But he knew it and he knew why and, as a result, his poetry is not frivolous.

Like O'Hara's, John Ashbery's poems are usually read as process poems because his way of listening to them is so eccentric, so much his own, that the difficulty in listening to it results in its not being attended to at all. In such a situation, it makes sense to me, in the light of the conception of poetry which I have been setting forth here, that a poet as thoughtful as Ashbery--even when treated as process poems his poems are recognized to be meditative chains rather than sensibility chains like O'Hara's--would write a poem that realizes poetically that ideal relationship between a work of art and its listener or observer that has been missing from his own experience and that of his poems. If readers of his poems are deaf to the dramatic interplay between their expressiveness and their poetic listening; why should Ashbery not write a poem in which he, while acting out the drama of his own expressiveness and attentiveness, attends to the dramatic interplay, say, between a painter's articulating his innermost feeling by way of his hand and the questioning way he observes that expressiveness with his eyes? Human community, in any case, is not possible in the fullest sense except between two or more persons each of whom is himself a human community of doing and thinking, of expressing and criticizing, of speaking and listening. If one is regularly mistreated by his readers, the thoughtful response would be to write a poem in which one treats another artist in the way he himself would be treated. One needn't have had a Christian upbringing to recognize that as good sense.

In his most recent long poem, "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," Ashbery does just that. The poem is an acting out of a perfect, though eccentric, responsiveness of the poet to a painter. It is a model of

how to attend to a work of art, how to listen to a poem. In the first section, the questioning attentiveness is felt to belong ambiguously to both Parmigianino and Ashbery, as though perhaps Ashbery mistakenly thinks that the painting comes alive only when attended to by a person other than the painter, as though the one place the painting can live is in "its room, our moment of attention." Such a blurring, sympathetic identification of observer with painting or listener with poem is almost unavoidable and explains why genuine art is always assimilated only very slowly. As the poem progresses, however, Ashbery discovers that the painter has been his guide, that his own critical attention has not been his, but is in truth a part of the painting. As a consequence, he begins to do some questioning of his own, and he gradually distinguishes himself from his mentor, discovering that his own attentiveness differs from Parmigianino's, even if they share so much, a cool scepticism about the centrality of all centers, a keen eye and ear for the extraneous, and a passionate love for the shadowy unrealities that suffuse and largely constitute the most vividly realized surface or "visible core." The splitting away of painter from poet begins with the lines:

You feel then like one of those
Hoffmann characters who have been deprived
Of a reflection, except that the whole of me
Is seen to be supplanted by the strict
Otherness of the painter in his
Other room. We have surprised him
At work, but no, he has surprised us
As he works. The picture is almost finished,
The surprise almost over, as when one looks out,
Startled by a snowfall which even now is
Ending in specks and sparkles of snow.

From this point on, the mix-up of Ashbery's own reflection, his secret sharer, his own shadowy listener, with Parmigianino's is over, and Ashbery proceeds to heighten his sense of the uniqueness of the painting by way of distinguishing it from his sense of himself.

Such a development is what it means to come to know a poem. Until it begins, one is just playing around. The full flush of identification,

the moment at which one listens to the poem with the ears of the poet, over, one then gradually explores the way the poet listens to himself by uncovering the differences between his way of listening and one's own. This aspect of listening to a poem is what ensures that one is not just making the poem up as he goes along and it validates the ultimate value of poetry, which is to bring one into intimate touch with the dramatic actuality of another person, a self-world, a transcendental society, a free human being. If one stops short of this divergence of one's own listening from that of the poem, one will forfeit the chance, as Stanley Fish himself admits, of knowing whether or not one's readings are solipsistic and wholly self-absorbed.

At first, it is true, the self-questioning, autonomous, experientially vivid poem may seem to swallow the reader up, even as he fears that he may just be making up this monster which is devouring him. But as one begins to attend with ears of his own to that touch of poetic listening which hovers about the lines of the poem, he realizes that the qualities of the poem demand the like from him, demand that just as he the reader listens to the poetic listening of the poem, he must also listen dramatically to himself, questioning constantly the way he expresses what he hears as the poetic listening of the poem. For just as the poem can be a human creation and not just a psychic process only if its speech is listened to by the poet as he speaks, so the reader can not truly listen to the poem unless at the same time he speaks the way he listens to it. Ashbery has not memorized and come to know Parmigianino's painting until he has articulated his way of attending to it as a poem. Ashbery's reader, in turn, will not have come to know the poem until he has discovered a form to articulate his way of attending to it. That articulation is apt to take a critical form, though of course it might take a poetic, rhythmic form or even the form of a painting. The exact

nature of that critical form is no more predictable, is no more determined by the poem which it is about than the poetic form of Ashbery's poem was determined by Parmigianino's painting. It might go at the poem directly, as I tried to do with Stevens' "The Snow Man," articulating its inner, rhythmic form. Or it might touch the poem only tangentially, being a general exploration of the idea of poetic listening, with only a few concluding references to the poem itself, of the kind I have just been offering. The reader's opportunity and responsibility to be free as a reader is no less than the poet's as a poet or the painter's as a painter.